

Continued attack on Sikhism in line with W.H. McLeodian school of thought

Dr Gurnam Kaur

While going through the book, “Relocating Gender in Sikh history: Transformation, Meaning and Identity,” a recently published book by “Oxford University Press, New Delhi. A revised version of Doris R. Jakobsh’s Ph. D thesis done under the guidance of Dr. Harjot Oberoi at the university of British Colombia, Vancouver, I feel it as a continued attack on Sikh ethos by the McLeodian school of thought. She has based her thesis purely on the writings of her Ph. D supervisor Harjot Oberoi, the books written by W.H. McLeod, Louis Fenech, Pishora Singh and the books written by European writers during the Colonial Raj. There is teacher-student relationship among all the above-mentioned scholars i.e. W. H. McLeod, Pishora Singh, Harjot Oberoi and Doris R Jakobsh. That is why all of them carry the same line of thought of Jat-Sikh theory and Singh-Sabha movement. None of them has gone through the primary source of Sikhism, Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The material on which Doris has based her research cannot be taken even as secondary sources. She has not used even the secondary sources of studies i.e. the sources that are not the compositions of Sikh Gurus but the compositions of Sikh scholars after the Guru period.

The western scholars are unable to understand the Sikh scripture, the Sikh culture, the Sikh psyche and the Sikh ethos. Being the student of Sikh philosophy for the last 34 years, I can well understand the study done by Doris is a planned attack on Sikh tenets

just to “sell ideas” and to get a Ph. D degree while doing something “new” and post-modern toeing the line of his guide Harjot Oberoi with pre-conceived conclusions. Harjot himself is of the opinion that this is a business society and you can sell your ideas, this can be proved from her thesis:

1. Instead of tracing the gender construction to the primary sources of Sikhism, she traces it to Singh-Sabha movement that also in equation to the British ideology that is absolutely illogical. She says’ “The process of active gender construction through Singh-Sabha educational and religious initiatives was based on newly articulated Sikh ideals shaped by Victorian gender ideals, as well as a ‘purified’ adaptation of Sikh ideology. (P 2-3).”
2. The initiation to Khalsa and naming injunctions were started equally to male and female during the time of Guru Gobind Singh but she says, “The justification for this expansion of Sikh identity to women can best be understood as a further attempt to conclusively separate Sikh females from the Hindu and Muslim counterparts. Transformed from an imprecise indicator of Sikh identity of women, the Khalsa rite of initiation came to be a strictly prescribed injunction. Similarly, naming injunctions that for males had long been associated with the Khalsa were broadened to include female appellations as well”. (P 5 bottom) “These new elites, having imbibed a liberal Western education, decried the undesirable aspects of the Sikh tradition; however, they were unwilling to reject that tradition outright.” (p 13).

3. She claims Guru Gobind Singh as the worshiper of Durga, which is contrary to Sikh ideology. About the Sikh women's history she says," In many ways then, these elite few conjure up false images of the roles and status of women in Sikh society. (p 17).
4. She being totally ignorant about the mystic traditions, unable to understand the mystic languages says," While earlier Gurus had indeed addressed the divine in the female voice as a symbol of their submission, with Guru Ram Das the symbol takes more on a more palpable reality; indeed, love of the divine came to be expressed in utterly profane language. Further, the female perspective towards the body of the guru is conspicuously emphasized." (page 31-32).
5. Supporting the Mcleodian theory she says,"Needless to say, this new breed of Jat constituents would have threatened the established order of the Sikh Panth; it became necessary to take action to stem the tide of an unwarranted egalitarian ethos. This fact may also have accounted for the absence of women in the system of Masand administrators." (P 34) The Jat component of the Khalsa as well as participation by other lower-caste groups increased radically; many Khattris, however, refused to follow the new injunctions put in place by the guru. They preferred to maintain their identity as followers of Nanak, whose message appeared inconsistent with the aims and regulatory symbols of the Khalsa order. (P 42).
6. She can not tolerate the equality on theoretical and practical basis in Sikhism and says," One must question whether Mai Bhago's inclusion points to the

equality between the sexes or to distorted notions of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality” (p 48) “The incident of Mai Bhago donning male garb and her taunting of the forty deserters become all the more intelligible given the pronounced emphasis on male gender construction through the creation of the Khalsa during the late seventeenth century. (P49)

7. She can not tolerate, if there is any positive attitude of British writers towards Sikhism and says,” In the female Sikh Jat the British had the mother of the Aryan stock in their midst and she in particular grasped their attention, particularly her physique, her stamina, and her participation in agricultural labour.” (p 73) “The fact that Sikh women were not ‘lost’ to the attainment of agricultural stability and development, making their situation similar to that of lower-class rural women in Britain, contributed largely to this positive evaluation of Sikh women and traditional Sikh attitudes toward women.” (73).
8. The Sikh Gurus were against the sati, purda and widow remarriage was initiated by them. She negates all these ideas by saying,” Once again the colonizers turned to the sacred writings of the Sikhs to understand the true position of women in Sikh society. Macauliffe in particular, spurred on by singular, positive scriptural references towards women, sought to present Sikhism in contrast to Hinduism. With regard to the ‘tyranny of purdah’, he went to great lengths to show conclusively that Sikhs stood outside the pale of Hinduism through ‘the high moral and enlightened teachings of the gurus’(P 74-75)” But the debate on sati had more to do with British compulsions of showing their moral superiority over the mores and values of Indians, and

over an indigenous Indian elite pursuing a cohesive nationalist identity as ‘keepers of tradition’, than the actual status of Indian women.” (75) “As with other issues, the British turned approvingly to the Sikhs of Punjab to contrast their practices with those of the Bengalis, most closely allied to the utter debasement of widows. While sati had been common practice among the earlier Sikh rulers of Punjab, its incidence among the general populace was rare. Through Sikh scriptural prohibitions against sati, officials equipped themselves with yet another point of similarity between themselves and the Sikhs.” “Thus, from the perspective of the British administrators, *karewa* had to be safe-guarded because stability in rural society was pivotal to their continuing positive relations with rural Punjabis.” (77)

9. The caste system has been rejected in the Bani as well as practically by the Gurus in *Sangat* and *Pangat* system, initiation into *Khalsa*. But she says about Singh-Sabha movement, “ The consumers of these ideals were professionals, many from lower castes, who had risen in status due to the opportunities offered by the British educational system. But their new-found status did not necessarily bring with it acceptance from the wider Sikh populace” (P 97)
10. If she has gone through the Persian sources she would have known that even the Muslim writers like Kazi Noor Muhamad praised the high moral standards of Sikhs. But she is of the opinion,” Without educated mothers, the Sikhs would continue to be mired in superstition, ignorance, and immoral practices; they would also be unable to compete in the milieu offered by their new rulers. British notions of the Jat Sikhs as remnants of the Aryan race were

appropriated to call for a return to their glorious heritage where both women and men had been educated. (P 132).

11. She takes the secondary Sikh sources as.” The Invention of tradition” and says,” Sundari and the other Sikh protagonists were flawless paragons of virtue and bravery, even supernatural. The protagonists were not transformed; they were the conduits of transformation. As such they came to serve as archetypal figures, a fundamental requirement in the worldview the Tat Khalsa was in the process of creating. Vir Singh, as the foremost proponent of the Tat Khalsa mindset, was the decided master of this invented tradition” (p 164). ‘The creation of alternative Sikh heroes and heroines was thus necessary to fulfill the elementary needs of a world view intent on the creation of Sikh distinctiveness’. (p 164)

Dr. Gurnam Kaur